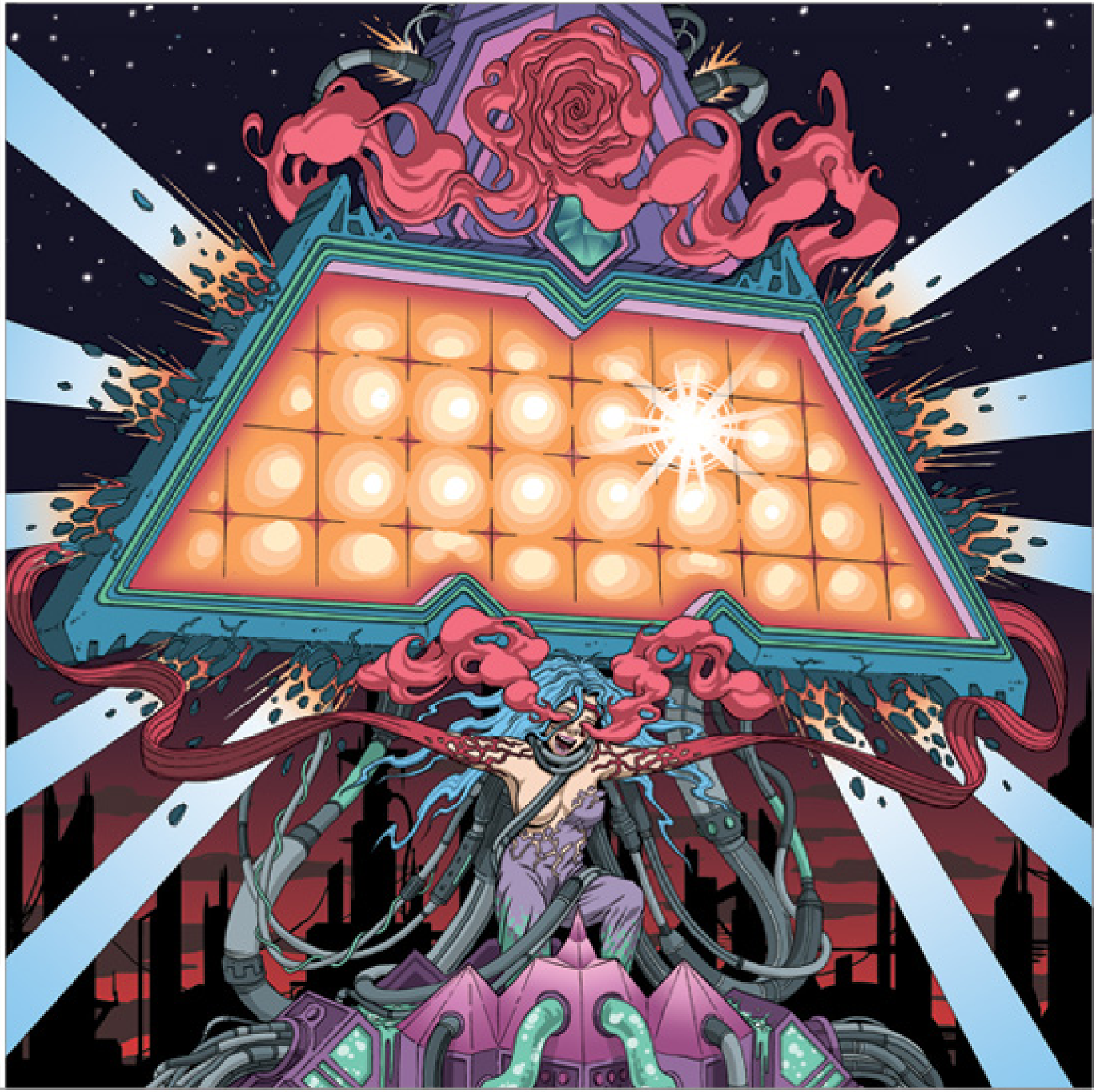


INTRODUCTION

Darkness.

“Think back to when you were a child, Luma,” says a voice. “Did you believe that monsters lurked under your bed at night? Did you lay awake in bed with your eyes shut tight against the dark? How long did you wait to open them and confront whatever shadows resided there? And what is the difference between the darkness of your eyes closed and the darkness of the night?”

Luma coughs herself awake. How long has she been asleep? Or has she been awake, but living in darkness for too long to know the difference? She can’t remember the last time she saw light, and hesitates to try, but a blast of memory manifests itself–the crystals! She tries to draw back, lose herself in the darkness that she’s been sleeping in, unaware of who she was – but the crystals shine on her mind through the darkness like the thought of a terror underneath the bed. She opens her eyes to confront it. Is this a memory, or is there a real crystal shining brightly before her? Or is she blind, her mind grasping at bursts of hallucination to make up for her useless eyes?

“This is not in your mind, Luma …

The crystal speaks! She cries out in disbelief.

“You hesitate, Luma,” the crystal says.

Luma gives a bestial wail, positive now that she’s lost her mind and her sight.

“See yourself, Luma.”

And suddenly the crystal is not the only thing shining in the darkness. Floating before her are small rivers and streams, far away but pulsing with a strange glow that shows the pull of their current. It is like watching millions of candle-lit funeral processions, some branching out from others and more branching out from them, but all flowing in the same step. Luma gasps at their beauty and they pulse as if in response. She waves her arms to snatch at the light and realizes that she is looking at her arms, the paths of her veins glowing just like the crystal that hovers patiently before her.

Luma waves her arms through the darkness and takes delight in the glow of her body. She looks down and laughs at the tiny streams of light that make up her

toes, the thick arteries of her legs, and beneath her breast, the searing center, that estuary of light which pushes and pulls all the light that tides through her.

"I thought I'd gone blind!" Luma shouts with glee.

"You have gone blind," the crystal says. "At least in the sense that your eyes have ceased working."

Luma blinks. No matter how tight she closes her eyes, the light of the crystal and her glowing body remain. The crystal dissolves and morphs into a huge glowing eye, as if reflecting the topic of their words.

"You've been falling through the darkness for so long that you had no need for your eyes, Luma. They stopped working when there was no light for them to work with. But there are different kinds of light, Luma, as you are no doubt able to see now. Not all light is perceived by the eyes alone."

"Yes, like a spirit! This light is my spirit!"

"Not quite. The light within you is not necessarily yours, Luma. Witness all the other forms it takes."

All around them appears an empire of stars and constellations, more infinite than the glowing veins in

Luma's body, which now seems like a plankton in an ocean teeming with light.

"Each one of these stars represent an entire world, Luma. Worlds in which there are billions of people, each flooded with the energy that you see in yourself now. Who are you to say that this energy is your spirit when there are so many others who share that light?"

Luma's mind does a dance. She's never had a conversation like this before, and can't remember ever even having the time to think about such things.

"So it's in all of us, and its not ours to control," she thinks aloud. "Then it must be like fate or God, or –"

The eye explodes, its light reassembling itself into the form of a skull, glowing and ethereal like Luma's veins. It gives a roar that shakes the stars around them, and Luma worries that she will be snuffed out by its breath.

"Not God!" the skull growls. "Many call it that, hoping to prescribe their beliefs upon others. Many who believe in God look at Him as if looking at a vanity mirror. No, Luma, there is no fate or God that pulls a willful string. Only humans would hope to

have such power. I prefer to think of the light that you see around us as a machine."

Luma shudders at the word. Machines are the foundation of the dark empire that she's grown up in. She's toiled under machines for most of her life and has known neither happiness nor enlightenment under their rule.

"Not like the machines that you know, Luma, made by men for one trite purpose. No, the machine that I speak of is far larger, far more intricate. Imagine a device like a mousetrap." The light of the skull vanishes and reappears as a glowing mouse confronted with a piece of cheese upon a block.

"In this machine there is an action and reaction, Luma. The mouse takes the bait and the snare is sprung." The mouse before her is suddenly halved by the mechanism of the trap before dissolving and transforming once again into the glowing crystal.

"Every pinpoint of light that flows through us is connected to one another, and each has the capability of being a mouse or a trap, an action or a reaction. When one becomes action, they trigger a

change that can spring forth and effect all other energies of the universe. The bait within us is not always apparent, Luma, because it is an energy that we cannot see with the naked eye. Yet once you recognize the potential of the light that you see in yourself and how you are connected to the machine of the universe around you, then an entire course of events can be sprung from your action."

Luma hovers in space. A moment of silence and darkness to take it all in.

"Okay," she says. "You're telling me I have the power to change the world, that there's this potential inside me, but what exactly am I supposed to do?"

The crystal falls silent and suddenly all the stars in space around them are slowly moving towards it, gathering inertia and light and being pulled into it as if it were a black hole. The crystal glows more luminously as it draws the stars into itself, then grows to the size and intensity of a sun, shaping itself into a shape that Luma can't quite make out. She gasps and shields herself weakly from the heat and brightness, then sees the shape for what it is–the letter M, so powerful now that there is nothing else in the universe

except for Luma and the giant M, crackling with energy.

“Look for the M, Luma.” it says.

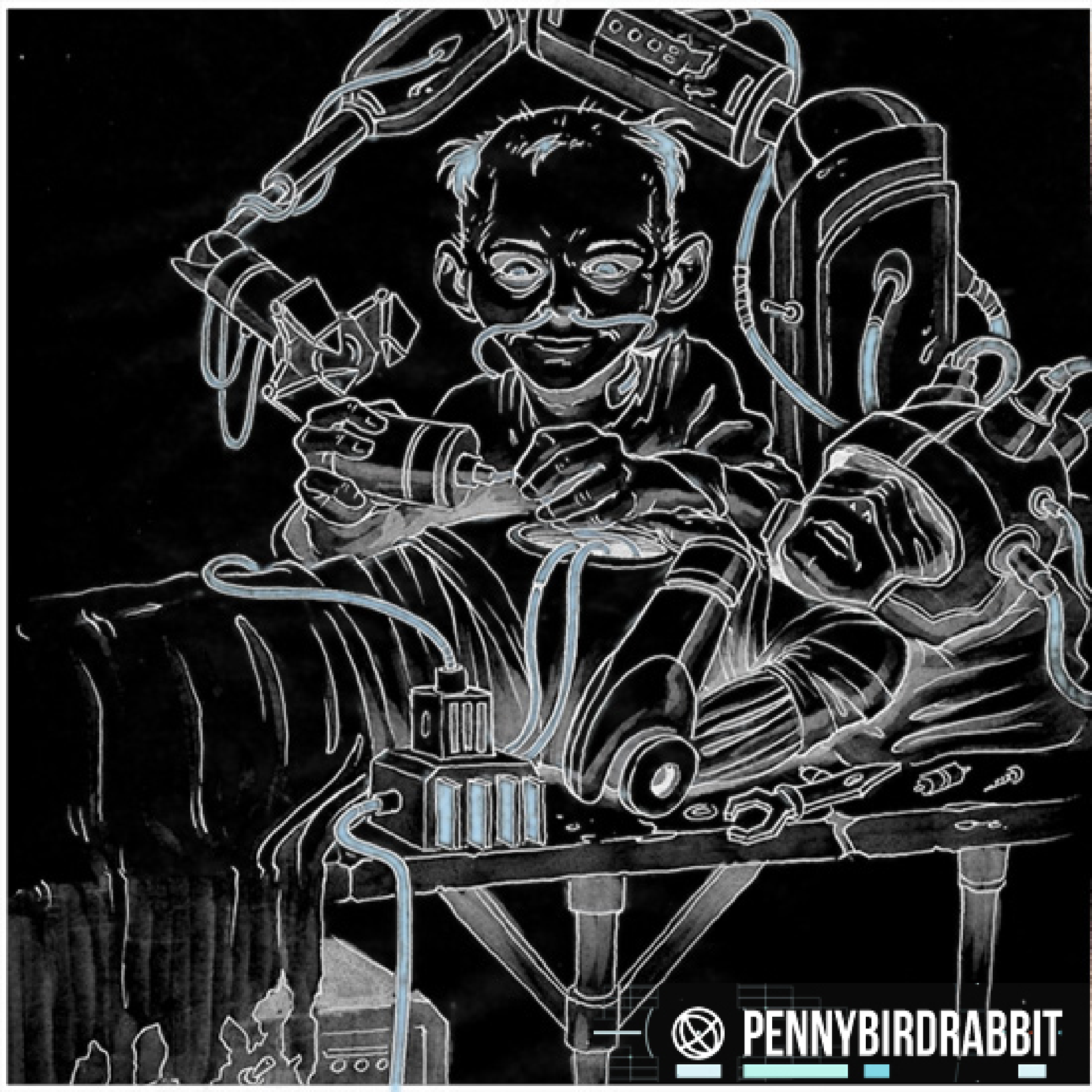
“I will!” she screams, so blinded and burned that she wishes the thing would go away.

“Harness your energy, Luma. Look for the M. It is the mechanism that you must trigger. You will be the mouse that sets the workings of the universe in motion.”

“I will!” she screams again. “Oh, I swear that I will! Please, just–” she fights a wave of nausea. She is being scorched. “Just tell me one thing! I know what happens to the mouse after it triggers the trap! It dies, doesn’t it?”

The light of the M is snuffed. Blackness again. But the voice of the crystal remains.

“NOT DEATH, LUMA. SACRIFICE.”


PENNYBIRDRABBIT

IMMIGRANTS

MI. L. O ... .. Online.

Milo awoke to cold metal against his face. Cold, jagged metal against his ... everything. Some long-ago, deep instilled instinct not to panic slammed down, containing his anxiety to a low crackle. He waited for a memory to spark. Held still for the flood of data that would surely arrive to connect the dots between now and ... . any single moment of his past. Anything. Nothing. Okay. Assess, Milo. He needed to get up. That ... that was not going to happen. What was all this junk? Did a house fall on him? He slid his eyeballs around their sockets, trying to figure out at least if he was right-side up or not. No sky that he could see, so inside somewhere, but the rest of his sensory input was giving him"garbage dump, "heavy on the metal. Eyes worked, breathing okay, and he could crane his neck enough to bump the back of his head against something pointy (if he cared to, which he didn't) but beyond that ... . he couldn't seem to locate the rest of himself. Perplexing.

"Perplexing, "he spat out, an involuntary interjection. Well, his mouth worked.

"What is this … junkpile…and why–"the intended"am I buried in it"was preempted by a clattering somewhere nearby. There was a buzzing noise, and a harsh light flared up, making Milo's eyes water. Shifting his focus from the machine parts jutting menacingly at his face, Milo took in the suddenly illuminated space.

It was too bright at the center, too dark in the corners by contrast, but something like a warehouse, or a factory floor minus the equipment.

(Minus the blood and lasers, his brain supplied, nonsensically. Minus the– minus– something, he couldn't remember.)

There were low tables placed irregularly, tools and bits of circuitry scattered around like some mad scientist forgot to pick up his toys. Here and there he could see larger objects– a suit of armor? That one looked like a vehicle– unfinished or haphazardly abandoned. On the far wall were three enormous round vents, like tunnel entrances, with small piles of garbage in front of them– junior versions of the rusting heap of debris he had somehow become a part of. Eyes adjusting to the light, Milo started to pick

up movement. Half a dozen skinny somethings, skulking around in the junk. Moving like spiders with not enough legs.

"Hey, "Milo rasped, "HEY. "Jumping at the noise, two of the grey blurs clambered toward him. Squinting against the glare, Milo blinked salt out of his eyes and the blurry shapes resolved into … people.

"His eyes are on, "one of them said, peering at Milo with her mouth in a crooked twist. The other one grunted. They were children. Small kids, maybe eight or ten years old, bloodshot eyes darting around like nervous mice. They were a uniform shade of dirty grey from head to toe, but for twin dark circles on their necks. Glyphs, imprinted. Similar to Milo's own tattoo but more intricate, red ink dulled over with dust. Dexterous. Oh.

"Where is this? "Milo asked, the words coming rough and brittle.

"Workshop, "the girl child said. Reaching out without warning, she swiped a finger at the corner of Milo's eye and sucked a tear off the end of it, laughing

shrilly at his expression. Dexterous Labor Kids. He'd heard stories, really just ghoulish rumors. They kept them underground to build delicate machinery. They fed them weird drugs to keep them small and make them smart. They ran wild in the tunnels, riding giant mutant rats. They were ghosts, they were cannibals, they weren't actually even real. The girl coughed wetly and the other one snuffled. They wiped their noses on their forearms in unison, staring at Milo with grim interest. If he'd been able to feel anything, it would've been a chill up his spine.

"Listen, "Milo said, throat tight. "I don't know how I got–"The Kids were already fidgeting, eyes roaming and hands picking through the garbage around them. The girl flicked a bug at the other one, who smashed it with his palm and flicked it back. "Can you move some of this stuff off me? So I can get out? "Attentive again, they stared at him. "Please? "The girl's eerie giggle rang out and the other one rapped on a nearby hunk of metal with his closed fist, grinning. Tonk tonk. Was that an answer? "Seriously–"

Across the floor there was a flurry of whispering and activity, grabbing the Kids' attention. "Seff's back,

"the girl piped up. The other one flicked a bug at Milo's face, making him sputter, and they half-slid half-climbed down the trash-mound to join the other Kids in front of the vents at the far end of the room.

Hollow banging and a scraping sound echoed out of the center vent. A loose collection of rubbish poured out in a wave onto the floor, followed a moment later by a herd of Kids sliding into view and jumping out of the circular opening like fleas. The new arrivals jostled amongst the waiting crowd (who were refusing to move out of the way), plucking scraps from the floor and beelining back to the worktables. The waiting group was silent, expectant. After a minute the scraping sound returned and another Kid slid into view.

He was the same pale grey as the others, small, stooped, and nearly bald with occasional tufts of brown hair decorating the dome of his head. He stood balanced on the rim of the vent and looked coolly down at the others. They stared back, one tense unit, like a pack of dogs listening for a command. The bald Kid reached into a sack hanging at his side and drew out two fistfuls of what looked

like glass vials, contents green and glowing. He tossed them at the Kids, who fell on each other, snatching them out of the air. Milo watched, astonished, as Kid after Kid pried open a small panel of flesh– on the underside of the wrist, forearm, back of the neck– and jammed a vial into it.

What? No. They couldn't– Milo screwed up his eyes, forcing focus. Small apparatuses, camouflaged by dirt and dust, seemed to be secured to the children's skin. Milo watched the liquid drain away into one Kid's abdomen, watched him huff out a harsh breath and jerk the empty vial out of its slot. He tossed it away, eyes shining, and shuffled jerkily over to a workstation, fingers already curling around wire, metal, tools. A calm spread over the workshop, but a busy one, nearly every Kid completely absorbed in complex work.

The bald Kid, still perched on the lip of the vent, looked coolly over the scene, then fished another handful of vials out of his bag and jammed one into a slot behind his ear. Milo watched as he drained three vials in quick succession: wham, bam, slam, empties tinkling against the ground in the space of a few

seconds. There was some neck-cracking – an odd gesture on a childish body– and the Kid jumped down to the floor. He made his way over to Milo's corner and dragged a barrel to the front of the heap, sitting atop it to put himself at Milo's eye level. He pulled another vial out of his bag and spun it idly in his fingers.

"You're online, "the Kid said. "We gave you some juice, before, "he rolled the vial between finger and thumb, not breaking eye contact. "Didn't know if you would wake up, so, huh. "He blinked twice, lizardlike. "I'm Seff. "

Milo's head was starting to hurt. "Look, "he said, voice cracking. "I don't have a clue what's going on here, or how I got here, or ... anything, but can you please, please, help me out of this junk. "

Seff shook his head slightly, "You were all busted up when they dumped you. Your connectors–"he wiggled his fingers animatedly at the back of his neck. "–not doing their connecty thing. We were maybe just gonna barbecue you, right? Like, happy birthday picnic. "The tone was joking, but Seff's seal-bark guffaw revealed a wide mess of dark grey

popcorn-kernel teeth. Milo wanted to shiver.

He tried again. "Get me out of this–"

"You are this junk, "came Seff's brisk reply.

Milo's head pounded. "What–"Seff waved a hand, like, don't even start, and pulled a crumpled handful of thin wire from his bag.

"Stuff's all screwy up there now, up on top, "Seff flailed a hand vaguely toward the ceiling. "They're supposed to, like, "the other hand deftly separated strands of pliable metal. "They're not giving us anything to do. Nothing's … "Snapping the desired lengths, holding the pieces in his curled pinky finger while the other fingers kept working. "We're SO BORED, "Seff growled, face murderous for a moment, then clearing when a cockroach caught his gaze and he snatched at it. "What are we s'posed to do while those Liners and Masks and Dogs go at it? It's boring. "

Milo's thoughts swam crazily, trying to make sense of anything Seff said. His mind flashed to the image of a face, a girl, hands in the air, eyes forward. Stop working, she said. Stop. Then lasers and blood and a

screaming feeling of violent despair. How could this have happened? A hundred workers howling the same lament. How could they have done this to–

"–so we worked on you. "Milo's focus snapped back. Seff had the cockroach flipped over and pinned with a finger and was winding bits of wire around its legs. "Gotta have a project. We're good at wires, you know? That's all that's really going on in there. Yours were just broken … and we'd been wanting to make, like, something big, for a while. I mean, we made machines to play with, "he placed the roach gently right-side up on something silver and curved. It tottered for a moment on its newly-extended legs, then went clacking nimbly up and away into the pile. "But none of them really played back. But we thought you might– and you're really huge, we spent weeks! And now you're online so let's go. "The Kid stopped talking abruptly, blinking at Milo like he expected him to have understood any of that.

"Go … .what? "Milo said.

"Up, "Seff said. Like it was obvious.

"WHY, "Milo roared back, panic fizzing up. Nothing made sense. His body was ... what was happening? Some of the other Kids had drifted away from their tables, lured by the noise of their conversation, and stood in a loose cluster behind Seff's barrel. They shifted from foot to foot and grinned creepily up at him.

"They forgot about us, "Seff said darkly. He locked eyes with Milo, his own grin spreading unevenly across his face. "And didn't you ever want to smash a building? "There was a short burst of vehement YEAH-ing from the Kids and some giggles. Milo fought the urge to roll his eyes, even as hysteria threatened to rise up and choke him.

"What do you think I'm gonna be able to do? "he moaned.

"You're really huge, "one of the Kids piped, prompting another round of giggles and explosion-noises that Milo had to fight to be heard over.

"I can't even move! "he bellowed.

"Yeah you can, "said Seff, and the chatter died down. "You're all wired up, you just don't get it. "He banged on one of the large metal pieces in front of him. "That's your arm, "he said, like an impatient professor. "Do you get it? Make your brain understand. Watch me. "He closed his fists and held his arms out straight in front of him. "Come on! "

"Come on! Come on! "The crowd of Kids crooned at him, jeering but also beaming with excitement. Milo felt a searing hatred, for them, for the world, for his helplessness. He blinked back angry tears and punched his arms out, knocking Seff's barrel over and sending him flying back onto the floor. Seff flailed and flopped over with a delighted whoop of laughter and the other Kids joined in, cheering and jumping. Milo stared in shock at the monstrous metal appendages in front of him. Those were his arms. They weren't heavy– rather, they were, but it wasn't his muscles holding them up. They held themselves up. He took a shaky breath and flexed his fingers: fist, fan, fist. Thumbs up. Victory sign.

"Metal Man! "Seff yelled, catching his eyes again. He stood up slowly and Milo mimicked his movements,

patchwork metal creaking and groaning.

"Are you doing this? Are you doing this or am I? "Milo yelped, as he rose to standing position. Seff just grinned. The Kids danced around his feet, beside themselves.

"This is so bomb, "one of them said. "We're gonna blow up everything. "

"What do we call him? "

"Iron-Manizoid! "

"Turbo-Blasto-Matador. "

"Beast-Quaker. "

"Stomp ... Wolf–"

"My name is Milo, "Milo said hotly. "You horrible creeps. "

Seff laughed and kicked Milo's giant foot with glee. "Yeah, right? M. I. L. O., like, perfect. Machine Inside, Living Outside, hahaha! "

"Isn't that backwards? "Milo narrowed his eyes. The Kids started rushing around the workroom, picking up

tools, weapons, donning goggles and assorted pieces of armor. "It's backwards, right? The machine is outside. "

Seff hoisted his bag and grinned at him. "The machine is going outside, right now! "he said. He grabbed a helmet off one of the tables and slapped it over his head, striding toward the vents and hollering for everyone to follow. Milo's steps shook the room.

"I'm not gonna fit in there, "he muttered contemptuously as Seff beckoned him impatiently into the tunnels. But he would. He just didn't have to like it.

Seff thundered and scampered ahead into the inky blackness as Milo folded himself over and started a long, pounding crawl.

"HERE WE COME, NASTY-TOWN"

DEEP SEARCH

That last dream… that last dream had been WEIRD.

Ok, they're all weird, what kind of involuntary tete-a-tete with a massive M-shaped entity wouldn't be weird? But that last one, Luma could say with conviction after snapping back to the dank reality of another crumbling dead-end alleyway, was the weirdest. Because that one had almost made sense.

The last moments of it still licked around the edges of her mind, a memory like a comfortable old story, beloved in childhood. Simple language, easy lessons. Once upon a time there was a little girl named Luma who could float up to space by the power of her beautiful hair. Every third Thursday she had a tea-party with the magnificent, shimmering skull-creature who blinded her with science and talked nonsense about mousetraps and what the dickens could he have been putting in that tea….

It had made sense, that vision, and in the space of the dream her purpose had been clear. But now things didn't make sense, and they weren't clear, and it was so frustrating she wanted to punch holes in the street. For ten seconds, she knew exactly what to do, how to FIX this, how to… how to what? Go down, girl, go

down. There's nowhere to go from here but down.

Almost a month since that day on the factory floor. Living a rat's existence, sneaking here, digging there. Head in the la-la-zone for most of it, but she heard things. Whispers of a current running through the dead-alives in the Line. Rumors of a warrior girl standing up to the man. While Luma ran circles, trying to get that mystical compass inside her (if it even existed, if this wasn't all just insanity) to line up and pull her toward the Great White Light, the city was telling itself a story. And like any good story, you weren't the same after you heard it. The workers were waking up, the pattern was breaking. Production not going so smoothly? City Guard up in arms? Black Masks mobilizing to"control a disturbance, "or"restore proper order, "or"quell nervousness. "Is it a battle if they don't call it a battle? Who gets to decide when it's a war? In these dark times, maybe you better not be too careless with your lightbulbs. Oh pretty city, what will you do when your lights go out?

The laughter bubbled up in her mind again, the sick, mocking voice of the king. How nice, to have a direct

pipeline to your worst enemy. Reach out and touch pure, smug evil.

You're pathetic, wheezed his voice. You're wasting energy for no reason. Plug yourself back in already.

Luma burned. The angry whiteness in her brain hummed like bees and blinded her. "I don't have to listen to you, "she ground out, body wanting to fold in on itself, knees aching when they hit the pavement. "I have to find you. "The light was gathering. "I have to find you and–"Heat rising off of her skin, peeling away, too hot, too bright. She knew what to do, what was it, what–"I have to FIND YOU AND–"She slammed her fist into the ground, power exploding outward with a crack and the rage dissipating like smoke. She sat back, blinking at the crater surrounding her. She'd punched a hole in the street.

"Ok…wait–"There was a grinding rasp, like the ground was clearing its throat, and then it gave way beneath her, pulling her downward in a flush of grit and darkness.

DOWN DOWN DOWN GO DOWN

Luma slid through the blackness, clawing at nothing, chewed at by shifting, pebbly teeth. She kicked out hard, felt a sickening drop, and was spat out unceremoniously onto a cold floor. Dust and gravel poured down after her, sounding like rain, telling her shhhhhh. It was utterly black. She concentrated on the light in her head, brought it up behind her eyes so she could see, then turned around to stare straight into the face of the shimmering skull-creature.

Luma barked out a startled cry and stumbled backwards. When her heart started up again she realized it was not, in fact, the cosmic manifestation from her dreams but the pale, inert face of an old man, enlarged and distorted by curved glass. A body in a tube, bristling with wires, motionless but somehow...present.

She stepped back and took in the cavernous room. Tubes, floor to ceiling, stretching up into the blackness. Hundreds of them, bunched together like glass flower stems, each containing a frozen form. Mothers, fathers, grandparents. Batteries.

It was the smallest sound, but Luma caught it. A gentle wave on a far shore, a host of halted elders

breathing in concert. Luma moved to the tube in front of her and rested her forehead against the glass. She caught their rhythm and breathed with them in the dark, a gentle glow rising and falling in time. It was so still and quiet she was tempted to slide to the floor. Wanted to give up and sleep, disappear in the dark for the rest of her days, remembered by nobody for doing nothing. But something moving– a dark reflection on the glass– caught her eye and she stood back suddenly, whirling around.

Nothing. Just empty blackness and the gravel-strewn floor. She faced the tubes again, her own reflection frowning back at her, and then froze.

One row back, on the convex surfaces of three other tubes, were the wavering reflections of someone else.

Three other someones, though nearly identical, heads and bodies completely covered, like deep-sea divers or space explorers from some old vidfeed. Each held a crystal, dense with its own light. Their images flickered, going grainy, then clearing, and scraps of memory flapped around Luma's mind like bats: crawling through the dark to take a monster by the claws, bloody conflict in a cavern… a rumbling

started at the base of her skull.

LUMA

Luma choked off a cry and pressed the heels of her hands hard against her eyelids. There it was, after so long. The voice of the Machine. Her head felt too full. I found you I found you–

LUMA, LISTEN

She opened her eyes and the Brothers moved as one, pointing their crystals toward the old man in front of her. The soft glow he'd been emanating sharpened and intensified, a sun rising inside of him until he was luminescent and the inside of the tube was crackling with power. His eyes opened. Luma held her breath as the old man coughed once, twitched his prominent nose, and cleared his throat.

"Well, "he said, blinking at Luma with a wry expression. "Here's what you need to know about the King. "

….history, power, cycles, destruction. As the old man spoke in a measured voice, the story he told bloomed vivid on the screen of Luma's mind. The M and the

King, a corrupt spirit in possession of untellable power. Other worlds, like hers but different, other peoples lured by power and promise aboard a ship that took them all to their doom. Use their strength to build the city, then plug them in to power it. Use them up and make room for the next boatload of hopeful souls. A simple formula for absolute majesty: use the power of the M to increase the power of the M. Lend me your voice, Machine. Help me use your light to keep them in my thrall and I will drain them for you, make them work, feed you their lives so that you may grow ever brighter. But energy produced by beings in pain is corrosive. As the King fed the M on fear and despair, he planted in it the seed of decay. Now it falters, do you feel it? The King's grasp on the city is weakening, and he too begins to rot and die…

"That's good, though, right? "Luma broke in. "Don't we want that? While he's weak we can take back the city– free the prisoners–"

"Shortsighted, "the old man said. "Who knows how much power he's got in reserve? He could lie low for a hundred years, save it up and blam! We want to do this right, you've got to repair the M. "

"What? "Luma said. "That doesn't make sense. You said the M is what gives the King power. "

"Yes, "said the old man.

"And fixing it would make it more powerful–"

"Yes, "said the old man, and the visions of the Brothers glowed brighter.

"–which would mean the King would get more powerful, too. "

"YES, "light flared up inside all the tubes, every withered face suddenly aglow, and their voices rang in chorus. "THERE IS NO LIFE WITHOUT POWER, NO POWER WITHOUT A SOURCE. THE KING IS NOT THE ONLY LIFE CONNECTED TO THE M. FREE THE CITY, REPAIR THE M. FACE THE KING AT HIS STRONGEST. WHEN THE M IS STRONG, THE KING IS STRONG, BUT WHEN THE M IS WEAK, LUMA, SO ARE YOU. REPAIR THE M. "

The light flared and subsided, leaving the room shrouded once again in darkness. The Brothers still flickered in front of her, glowing crystals casting just enough light to see the old man's face.

"I don't.... I still don't think I understand, "Luma's breath caught and she trembled, more afraid than she had been since she'd stepped off the ship, months ago. "How do I repair the M? What does it need? "

The old man's face was sorrowful and kind. He gave a kind of shrugging smile. "It needs life. "

"Mine? "

"You're not alone in this. You have allies, can you feel them? "A nudge at her mind and Luma followed it, like trailing a hand through water. Prisoners, asleep and waiting. Angry workers pressing back against the things they feared. A forgotten army and a weapon with hidden depths. Elements of chaos she could weave together.... Machine lend me strength...

"Set the machine in motion, Luma. Free the city, spring the trap. "

"Make the sacrifice, "she said, and swallowed her fear. "I'm ready. Take me to it. "

The Brothers raised their crystals and turned them toward her, crackling energy making an aura around her. The earth began to shake and as her vision

faded, she heard the old man's voice again.

"Be brave, Luma, and remember this:

"YOU'RE NOT THE MOUSE. YOU'RE THE TRAP. "

THE BOOK
OF
WISDOM

A KING ALONE

The following is the only known excerpt from The Book of Wisdom, a journal which supposedly documents the early life and exploits of the legendary trio of warriors known only as The Brothers of Wisdom:

“ … such a blast of radiation that many shadows of people and household objects were burned into whatever walls were still standing after the detonation. Thus an eerie portrait of residents and the activities they had been doing at the time of detonation had been preserved when many of the people themselves were obliterated. We toured these ruins for days in search of the blueprints that the General was convinced would lie in the rubble of a particular warehouse, but there was no chance for the survival of even the strongest safe or lockbox. Thus the General’s efforts to gain an upper hand upon his enemy had directly destroyed his chance for success in that endeavor.

“The General’s decision to detonate the warhead and our subsequent assignment to search amongst the destruction for the blueprints that he sought represented a major shift in the way that the three of

us considered the purpose of human knowledge and its relationship to conflict. The General's warhead had been dropped on his enemy in the name of ending the conflict, yet the detonation made no advancements to that end; the only ends it achieved were the endings of thousands of human lives. After seeing such unjust destruction and loss burned into the ruins of the city, a great disconcertion was burned upon our minds and our consciences. We could no longer agree with the principle of using scientific knowledge for the advancement of armed conflict, no matter how efficiently such knowledge purports to end the ultimate root of conflict. Knowledge employed in the advancement of arms can only beget a greater volley of firepower from the opposing force, no matter how promising the prospects of peacemaking may be.

"After three days of searching for the blueprints to no avail, we found ourselves making camp atop the highest structure still standing: a weather station atop a tower that not a week before had been the scientific school of a prestigious academy. Amongst blackened charts and shattered instruments, we found evidence that the academy had been employed in the

development of an unmanned airship that could propel itself upon major air currents and distribute poisonous gas in the guise of harmless rain clouds. Thus no side of the conflict was an aggressor or victim; both were actively working towards the destruction of innocent people whom both considered an enemy. In the rubble of that weather station, the three of us made a pact: to abandon the pursuit of knowledge in the name of war; to champion the pursuit of wisdom, which we identified as the means to a sound and just human mind; to search out machines of warfare and any knowledge that services such machines and if possible destroy them.

“Our pact was three-fold and there were three of us. It was only logic that compelled us to adopt the object of our pact in the form of our names. We renounced the names that were given to us at birth and became the Brothers of Wisdom, a means to further embody the quest that we now devoted ourselves to. One of us became Deft Brother, for he has the most technological and combat expertise. The other became Dear Brother, for he is the most adept of us at conciliation and peacemaking. I became Deep

Brother, for I am most versed in the written word, rhetoric, and the scholarly arts, thus my authorship of the record you are now reading. Together, as the Brothers of Wisdom, we were the perfect triumvirate for a campaign against military tyranny and the championing of wisdom and justice.

“Our first goal as our newly discovered personas would be to resign ourselves from the military institution to which we were employed, preferably in a way that would shatter or at least radically alter the military functionality of the enterprise. We designed a plan that would impound the remaining warheads in the General’s possession and render them obsolete, but our first attempt to carry out this plan was thwarted by the … ”

This concludes the only known excerpt from The Book of Wisdom, recently discovered by archivists now working to restore the library of the School of Ingenious Translation, an academy in Metropolis that housed a large collection of philosophical and scientific texts from across the universe, including one of the only known copies of The Book of Wisdom. The School of Ingenious Translation was

razed by authorities of Metropolis only a few years after its founding, and very little remains of the books and records that were kept there.

READ ON, DEAR BROTHER

FACES

Metropolis, city of dreams.

If you could do it, if you could shake off the suffocating drudgery of the Line and rise up into the air to view the city from above, it wouldn't look so different than before. Lights still glimmered; edges still gleamed sharp. Even if you spun in the air, arms outstretched, and swan-dove back down to the ground, you'd have to get quite close before you saw the scorch marks, the blown-open doors, broken windows and scattered debris that marked a territory at war. If you did get that close, your last thoughts before your death by high-impact collision might be... it looks much nicer this way.

* * * *

"THOSE WHO WISH TO RE-ENTER THE FACILITY MAY DO SO NOW, SINGLE FILE. YOU WILL BE SAFE IF YOU REMAIN CALM AND ENTER VIA THE MAIN ENTRANCE. "

Lying flat against the dented metal surface of Milo's back, Seff snorted. Milo rolled his eyes in agreement as he watched an unfortunate Black Mask disappear under a swarm of Line Workers, whose murderous

fury was palpable even from their high-up hiding spot. Those who wished to re-enter the facility probably wouldn't have nearly blown it up just to get out.

The rooftop was high enough that Milo didn't worry about being spotted, and lying prone with his face jutting just over the edge, it was a good vantage point for observation. The Kids had tried to bully him into the conflict zone the second they'd surfaced from the tunnels, but while the idea of stomping and rending his way through a throng of Black Masks grew more appealing with each Citizen they brought down, Milo wasn't as confident in his invulnerability as his gang of scrubby architects. He'd scouted a safe haven immediately and started climbing, Kids following even as they hurled insults and tried futilely to make him obey. Eventually he'd convinced them a little strategic planning wouldn't hurt. And besides, he'd pointed out, he might survive a direct assault on the City Guard, but the rest of them would absolutely be eaten by Dogs.

And speaking of... Milo cringed as the unmistakable metallic jingling reached his ears and a herd of sleek,

armored quadrupeds came tearing out across the open square. They set upon the struggling Liners with swift efficiency, and whatever momentary advantage the CItizens had enjoyed was lost. The Dogs. They were more frightening than the Guard, with their animal viciousness. They had to be machines, but they bit like they were starving, and when they barked it sounded like a trash can hitting a window. It was the Dogs more than anything that kept Milo hesitant. There was no way he'd let these Kids, gross and creepy though they were, follow him into that kind of danger. Though he was a little worried if he kept up the"observing"much longer, they'd start throwing themselves off the roof out of boredom.

True to form, there was shuffling and bickering behind him and then the sound of something metal being wrenched out of place. Milo looked over his shoulder.

"What are you doing? "he said irritably. The three Kids yanking savagely at the intricate contents of a circuit box they'd pried open glanced guiltily at Milo for all of half a second and then immediately went back to what they were doing. "What are they doing?

"Milo craned his neck to ask Seff, who was watching them with a considering look.

"That's Power Grid access, "he said, cocking his head. "Or like, it is if you– yeah they already– no but you guys–"Seff sprang from his perch and scrambled back to join the others, fingers already twitching. Milo left them to their frantic huddle and turned his attention back to the fighting below. The Liners left standing were split up in two groups, one cornered by Black Masks, the other by Dogs. Backs against walls as the City Guard advanced. He closed his eyes. What could he possibly–

Seff ran over Milo's back with a series of hollow clanks and jumped down beside him into a crouch. "Check it out, "he said, grey, cracked grin blooming huge on his face. Before Milo could raise an eyebrow in question, one of the Dogs was hit by lightning and exploded.

A cheer rang out from the Kids and Seff howled with laughter, rolling over on his back and kicking. Milo's mouth dropped open. "Wha–"he started, but there was a high-pitched"Ready ready readeeee–go! "from behind him and another Dog popped like a blossom

bursting open. "How are you guys doing that?! "

Seff's eyes were dancing. "We're just overloading those flood wires, over there, "he flung an arm out, indicating a thick twist of sparking lines stretching over the length of the square. There was some anticipatory giggling, and Milo watched astonished as another Dog passed under the wires and a crackling strand of light slapped down on it like a frog's tongue. Another victory cheer, and Milo shook his head. Seff pounded on his shoulder plate in manic glee.

"This is a good hiding spot! "he crowed. "We can have all sorts of fun up here! "

Milo watched as the confused Black Masks tried to corral the startled Dogs, Citizens taking their moment to scatter. He turned to face Seff.

"What else can you do? "

* * * *

There's not much room...in our cocoon...our little elevator to the stars...

Luma sat folded up, the glow from the Brothers' crystals so bright it hardly made a difference if her eyes were open or shut. There was a sensation of traveling while remaining completely still, the four of them encased in light, sliding through the layers of the earth. In contrast, her mind felt unfolded, spread out and draped over the entire city. A light touch and she could read everything.

The battle at the city center was a bright mosaic of anger and pain. It looked like waves crashing. It looked like water circling a drain. The citizens were like a fire trying to gain purchase on something too cold and wet to burn. Luma could feel the strength leaching out of them and pushed further, looking for help. Under the streets, just a short distance from the frantic conflict in the square, the hidden prison beckoned her with slow, rhythmic breaths. Time to get up...

She aligned herself with each sleeping prisoner, made her eyes their eyes and helped them awaken. She felt the shape of them, alien and familiar, felt the muscles stretch and sluggish hearts begin to beat again, in time, with purpose, for one single reason: to

be free. Their rage was a howling wind that ripped through tubes and wires, tore off doors, and drove them to the surface, to the city. With Luma's light behind their eyes they marched toward the war.

IT'S NOT SO EASY AS THAT

The King's power descended like a curtain, an insect-like drone accompanying the feeling of slamming doors. Her warriors were halted, their escape route sealed. Luma gritted her teeth and spread the fingers of her mind out further, searching for something, for someone who could help...

* * * *

"–et them over to that side of the building and we'll knock the tower over on them. "Seff's voice buzzed tinnily from the improvised speaker he'd rigged by Milo's ear. Milo shifted his grip on the two huge girders he was holding, arms spread out like wings, and advanced on the waiting guard. He swung the girders like scythes, forcing the Black Masks to choose between being threshed or or being herded. Step by step he urged them backward, setting them up for attack from above. He'd gotten pretty good at

this people-moving thing.

The Kids had taken quickly to guerilla tactics, conjuring elaborate scenarios and setting traps, agreeing to keep their theater of operations at a rooftop level if Milo would do their dirty work on the ground.

"This is what you're for, you know, "Seff had whined at him. "Go do something interesting or we'll take you apart! "

Is this really what I'm for? Milo wondered, dropping one of the girders and turning around, swinging the other in an arc up over his head and down. It slammed into the ground between him and the group of Black Masks that had approached while his back was turned, showering them with pieces of broken pavement. They got a few shots in, but it was really no contest. They were like ants to him. But there were just...so...many...ants.

When it had become clear to the fighting Citizens that Milo was both on their side and largely indestructible, they'd heeded his shouted instructions and retreated, putting their energy into building up a

barricade while Milo tried to keep the Black Masks busy. But he wasn't fast, and the guard seemed to get more numerous every time he turned around. An uphill battle, sure, but you can't win if you never reach the top. Something was going to happen– he couldn't keep them away from the barricade forever– they were going to get past him, they were going to get–

MILO

It was like plunging into icy water. Everything around him was suddenly slowed, muted.

LISTEN TO ME

There was a fizzing feeling behind his eyes, then the world whited out and he was in some kind of dream. His vision stretched, somehow, and he could see the city from above and below at the same time. Beating hearts and marching feet, moving steadily to a dead end, no escape–

THESE ARE YOUR REINFORCEMENTS, MILO. UNBLOCK THEIR WAY.

The monument. The mountainous slab of stone just a short distance from the square, the King's words and visage carved upon it like a warning to the sky. They were going to come up under it– his soldiers, they were his soldiers now. He had to get them out, had to–

HELP THEM

The fizzing stopped and Milo snapped back to the moment. He had a heady sense of foreshadowing, like the future was set and he could see it. If he took one step in the right direction, everything would fall into place. Black Masks swarmed around him, grabbing, climbing, trying to get to something vulnerable. He shook them off like water.

"Seff! "Milo yelled into his radio. "We have to destroy the monument! Like, totally blow it away. Can you do it? "

"The big stone thing? "came the answer, awash in static. "Why d'you wanna do that? "

"Can you do it?! "

"Well yeah, but I gotta go down there to–"

"I'm coming to get you, "Milo said. He turned back toward the barricade and shouted to the Citizens behind it. "Hold the Guard back! Help is coming, I promise, just hold on! "Then he stomped and slashed his way through the advancing throng, trying to close his ears against the sound of their attack.

* * * *

The sound of Luma's breath came harsher and harsher in her ears until she realized it wasn't her own she was hearing. Her eyes flew open and she staggered to her feet, eyes adjusting to the dimness. The Brothers stood in a loose wall in front of her, crystals held steady, their light subdued. In front of them was the King.

He looked… so small. Body a wrecked piece of desiccated flesh, wrapped in black cloth and tilted awkwardly as if held up by wires or strings. Tubes snaked in and around him, anchoring him in his throne and rising up behind in a dripping and blackened tangle. Disappearing up into the shadows that obscured where they joined the Machine.

It was massive, and immobile, fixed above the King by who knew what. Every cell in Luma's body was alert to its presence, dark and silent as it was. She took a halting step forward, joining the Brothers. Somewhere in the M's core a cold gleam arose, matching the King's eyes as he let out a low, crackling laugh.

"So you found us, "he rasped. "Forgive me for not standing on ceremony. "

He was like cobwebs stretched over brittle bones...it wouldn't even take the strength of one hand to crush the life out of him–

Luma didn't realize she'd been walking forward until she slammed against an invisible wall. The King's cold eyes were amused. Luma pounded on the barrier with her fists, a guttural scream tearing out of her as the wall of power held fast, indifferent. A hand clapped on her shoulder– one of the Brothers– and pulled her gently back.

"Enough, "snapped the King. "Surely you didn't come here just to bore me with pathetic attempts at foolish bravery. "He nodded slightly toward the M.

"We've been waiting a long time for this. "

The hand on her shoulder squeezed lightly and Luma turned around to face the Brothers. "It has to be done this way? "she asked hoarsely. A nod from all three. "But we'll be giving him... so much power... "The Brothers held their crystals out to her and she held her hands out over them, their soothing energy curling around her fingers like smoke. She took a shuddering breath and concentrated, trying to reach out for the white light, the voice that had brought her here in the first place. "Set the machine in motion, "she whispered. "Free the city–"

The crystals shook in the Brothers' grasp, a low hum resonating inside them, echoed and amplified by the M. Trembling veins of light began to stretch from the Machine, drawn toward the crystals and the four figures hunched over them. The vibrations rose up into an eerie, mournful wail, matching but not drowning out the triumphant laughter of the King.

Luma squeezed her eyes shut and reached out–

* * * *

"–but how did you KNOW they were in there? "Seff's words were choppy as he bounced against Milo's shoulder, holding on for dear life as Milo ran them back toward the square.

"I don't know! I don't know, I just– something– I saw–"Hundreds of prisoners– some unlike anything Milo had ever seen– had come streaming out of the ruins of the monument and gone racing toward the sound of battle. It was just like his vision, which meant it wasn't over, which meant he had to see–

Milo launched himself at the side of a building, grasping at the exposed wiring that tumbled down its side, and climbed feverishly. He needed a higher vantage point. He had to get a sense of...

Reaching the roof, Milo scrambled toward the edge and came skidding to a stop, taking in the scene that spread out below him. The prisoners had rushed in behind the Guard, effectively trapping them between themselves and the Citizens still holed up behind the barricade–most of which had been destroyed by now. Both sides fought savagely inward, wave after wave of surging violence crashing against an opposite force. Milo watched the faces of the Citizens and prisoners

alike, watched them growing blanker, more mask-like. Eyes darkening until they looked dead, no matter how fiercely their bodies fought on.

No, no no. That wasn't what the vision had–

* * * *

With every passing second, the M grew brighter and the King's body restored itself, glowing and gloating. His raucous, cackling laughter rang out over the hum of rising power, making Luma's skin crawl. The genuine, twisted joy of it was enough to make her despair– except that she couldn't help sharing it. She was growing stronger, too. The energy flowed back and forth between her and the M, amplified and refined by the crystals. She could feel the strands that connected her, the M's power spreading out like a vast web. Here was the King, wired up tight to the Machine, and here were the thousands of tiny lines twisting out from him, his harness on the city.

"It's not the feast it was when they were working, "mused the King, as if sensing her thoughts. "But the war will serve as well… still they feed me, still they burn. "

Luma stretch out along her own lines, felt the power moving. It went both ways; the M could give and take, why shouldn't she? She looked again at the King, steadily sucking power toward himself, then shifted her concentration. Focused...outward.

"What are you doing? "The King narrowed his eyes. Luma smiled sharply, pushed harder. "What are you–"

* * * *

Milo felt it hit him like a punch to the chest. He choked out a strangled cry and stumbled, falling to one knee and dumping Seff onto the rooftop.

THIS IS YOU, NOW. THIS IS US.

He knew everything. He could see it. The glowing Machine pouring power into him, filling him up. His mind unraveled and rocketed upward, weaving into a waiting pattern, welcomed into a circle of light. The power pulsed outward around him, looking for somewhere to go.

CONNECT

Pushing off from the rooftop, Milo landed in a crouch, dust flying up from the impact. He fixed his eyes on the battle in front of him and thrust both fists into the ground. The power surged outward, racing along invisible paths and making contact– encircling each Citizen, every prisoner and Black Mask, weaving a web of light and heat around them.

STOP

Milo pulled at the strands, let the Machine's energy crash into him and flow outward until every single person was glowing, connected, and still.

They were his to command.

The fighting was over.

* * * *

This time the laughter that rang out was Luma's. The King's expression was sour, and the delicate strands that had connected him with the city were curling into dried husks, dropping away. On the one side, a circle in balance: the M, Luma, Milo and his frozen battlefield. Each pulled power from the others, joined it with their own and pushed it back. Not draining but

resonating. Power spent was power gained. On the other side: a King, alone. Drinking power from the M. Growing stronger, growing brighter.

Luma stepped forward; the King sat up straighter. "Don't you think it's time you gave this up? "they said in unison.

"We're winning, "Luma said breathlessly.

"You're dying, "said the King.

His words sent a tremor through her. A host of sensations pushed away in the heat of mental warfare came creeping back. Her chest felt hollow, sliced through by broken glass. She wiped a hand across her mouth and it came away bloody. "No, "she started. She looked back at the Brothers, but their face shields reflected nothing but her own sunken eyes.

"You may have noticed, "the King went on, "that I am not. That I am in fact stronger with every minute. Stronger, "his voice echoed and the light in his body gleamed evilly, leaking out from his skin, "– than I have EVER been. Strong enough to withstand anything you could think to throw against me, so I

think it's time you made the right decision. "

Luma leaned forward. The King's barrier still held. She rested her weight upon it and stared hatefully at the shining figure sitting in his throne.

"Acknowledge the superior force, "said the King, tendrils of light worming out from his eye sockets, "and be drawn to it. You can step down now, and live under my rule. Or die here and leave me equally victorious. It's not a question of winning, Luma. "He turned his creeping gaze upon her. "Surrender to the victor or lose twice. "

Luma took a heaving breath and pushed off from the barrier, standing unsteadily on her own power. "Pretty words, "she rasped.

"Take my advice, "said the King, voice deceptively kind. "Stop fighting. "His skin had become translucent, and smoothed out, features losing their distinction as he glowed brighter and brighter.

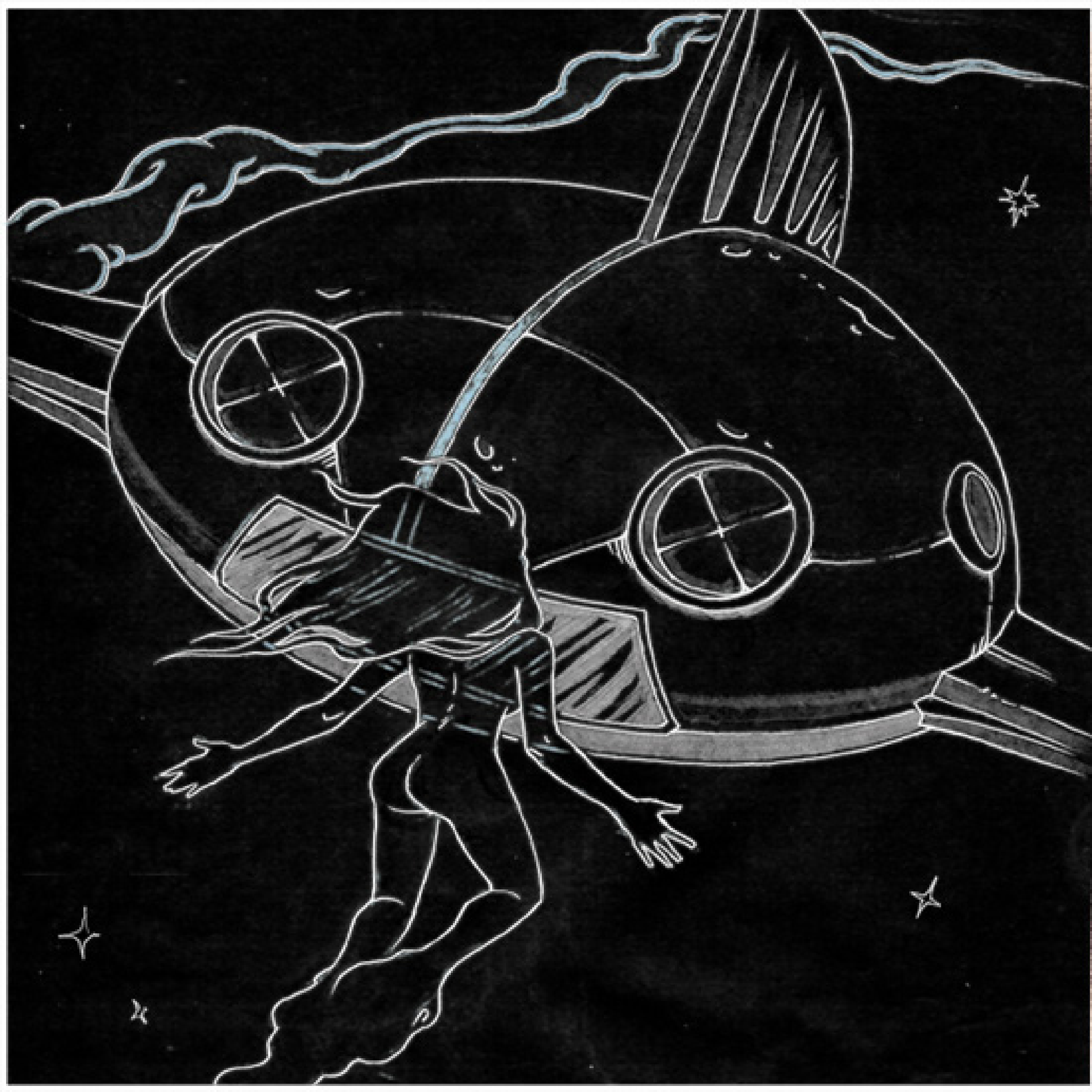
"You know, "Luma said, and huffed out a laugh. "That's the first time you've ever given me good advice. "She reached behind her, placed a hand atop the crystals, and poured all of her strength into the M.

Surrendered her power to it, accepting its magnetic pull. Allowed her very life's breath to be drawn to the superior force.

She could hear the King laugh as she did so, felt the power rise and rise within him. It filled up the space between each atom of his body and expanded, diluting him, diffusing his physical form until he was only power, only light. The Machine flared from within, at long last fully restored, and the King was lost in a burst of light on light.

Luma dropped to the ground, light from the M warm against her skin. Hot, too hot. She felt herself separate into her composite parts. These were her limbs, her teeth, her bones. Organ after organ making itself known, then fading away. She saw the Brothers move to stand over her, silhouetted in the glow of the Machine. Her molecules buzzed, then blinked out of existence. She melted into the light, and it was over.

IT WAS OVER



BLACK

There is darkness again. Luma searches for light but finds none. She searches her memory for the last light that she remembers and sees again the terrible battle in the depths of the city and all the bursts of color: vaporous greens sparked by those horrific and gleeful children, the blue jolts of electricity shuddering through the joints of the android boy whom she vaguely recognized–a face in the crowd–the white-heat flames that spewed from the Black Masks that defended Metropolis, and the dull ruby glow of the bodies of their victims that lay smoldering to ashes…but the color that lodges itself in her memory above all others is the strange glow of the crystals wielded by the three figures who stayed by her side throughout the ordeal, those ghostly brothers whom she felt so in tune with.

On remembering those crystals, Luma sees them clearly in front of her, and has a brief feeling of deja vu, remembers the philosophical chat that she's already had with this crystal or dream or whatever the strange entity is that glows before her again.

"It's you again," she says sweetly to the crystal, as if greeting a stray cat that comes around to pay homage

to her ankle on a daily basis, and at this thought, the form of the crystal dissolves into the shape of a cat, every hair and whisker bristling ethereally, its tail swishing a trail of light through the darkness like a neon glow-stick. It gathers its paws under itself, regards Luma with a high squint, and purrs with a vibration that awakens the stars around them.

"There is no 'me,' Luma," the cat purrs. "The 'me' that you see before you is nothing but a small fraction of energy that powers the engine of our universe. And thanks to your sacrifice, the energy that powers it will continue to burn well."

"But it was so horrible, little cat," Luma begins to cry. "You've no idea! There was so much death and it was all so terrifying, but I did my best…we found the king, me and those three ghostly men with the crystals, and he wasn't even human, you know, he was just this all-consuming monster, sucking the life out of everything around him like a black hole or something. But I did what I was supposed to do, I think. You and so many others, those poor people in the tubes, were telling me to change things, to be like the mouse setting off the trap, you know? And I think I did that, I

pushed back, and everything changed, but I don't know what happened, I–where am I now, cat? What has happened?"

Luma collapses in a heap upon herself, so eager to tell the cat everything but lacking the breath to tell it. The cat yawns, baring its constellation of fangs. "I can show you," it says.

In the darkness of space that the girl and the cat converse in there suddenly appears the lights of a giant city on an otherwise lifeless planet. As Luma squints she can see the pops and sputters of fireworks. She gasps, fearing this to be the signs of ongoing battle, but the cat yawns and the city draws closer and she can see clearly now all sorts of people and other creatures dancing jubilantly in the streets, hugging and shaking hands or paws or tentacles with each other. Presiding over the celebration is a gigantic M, emitting its glow over the city as if fueling the energies of each and every reveler below.

"It's not a battle!" Luma whispers to herself. "It's a party! What can this mean, cat? Did we free them? Did I really stop the King?"

“The King’s power has been absorbed by the M and now radiates outward along paths that he never intended to be two-way streets. What he constructed to his own advantage now serves the people that he exploited for so long. Look closer, Luma.”

She gasps. Underneath the tendrils of light and energy that radiate from the M she sees herself in a terrifying form–eyes bulging, mouth twisted, arms splayed outward and tangled into the framework of the M. Her body, her own limbs and heart and lungs, enmeshed so horribly within the that great machine, remind her of a mouse caught in the deadly mechanism of a mousetrap.

“Do not be alarmed,” the cat says. It stretches, bursts, and takes the form of a skull before continuing. “Just as there is no ‘me,’ Luma, you must also realize that there is no longer a ‘you.’ Like a mouse being crushed by a mousetrap, you have triggered a great event that has required great sacrifice. I have always been this way–pure energy with no form–but you are new to this, and still must learn what this means. Your corporeal self has been rendered quite obsolete, as you can see, but that sacrifice brings new energy and

vitality to a world that has been deprived of life. Every action has a reaction, Luma, and your action has had effects that resound further than you could ever imagine."

Luma begins to cry, moves her hand to wipe her eyes, but her hand encounters no cheek to wipe her tears from. There is only light upon light, and as she regards herself she can see only tendrils of tiny stars that vaguely resemble arms.

Suddenly there are several space shuttles setting off from landing pads on the high towers of Metropolis, great titanium-clad balloons adorned with fins and engines, slowly gaining elevation as they push towards the stars. They grow closer and closer to Luma and her ethereal companion, and before she can think to try and move away or wave and shout to stop them, the ships are bearing down upon her. She is struck head-on by one of the great vessels, and she screams at the expectant pain, but the ship only moves through her as if cutting through air, and as it flies through her she is subject to a tour of the its insides: the engine room with its mechanical teeth pounding fuel into velocity, the deck with its

mechanics arching over control panels, and the cabins with their passengers, various species nestled in each others arms. The ship passes through her on its course and Luma is left in the darkness of desolate space once again. She continues to cry, her tears of loss becoming tears of delight, and finds herself laughing.

“Refugees,” the skull says, “finally free to leave the city that held them captive for so long. They are going home now, thanks to you.”

Luma looks down at the city and smiles. “Then it is done,” she whispers.

She can hear the thrum of music coming from the revelry below; drums that shake the whatever buildings are left standing and keyboards that belt out tunes like lasers. The dancers in the streets are moving in such a frenzy that they seem on the brink of rioting. There’s a swirl of rain clouds over one part of the city and Luma can hear thunder colliding with the beat of the music, but the crowds do not look for cover from rain or storm, they only dance on in glee. The M shines on brightly, a beacon of pure energy and life amid the darkness of space.

THEN IT IS DONE

SHADOW IN THE ROSE GARDEN

ALetter Written by Milo, Citizen of New Metropolis

If there were a way to protect the ones you love from the ills of humanity—from war, disease, poverty … wouldn't you do it?

As those of us who have chosen to remain here rebuild our city, construct a new Metropolis from the one we fought so hard to destroy, I often think about the final moments of the war. Do you know what it's like to hold a moment in your grasp? To feel hundreds of lives fluttering inside your cupped hands and know that in an instant you could crush them? To have people under your direct control is terrifying, because in that instant, right and wrong realign themselves to match your next action. You become the center of the world.

It only felt that way for a moment, really. As we organized ourselves, dealt with the injured, rid the Black Masks of their weapons, I felt less and less like I was bending the others to my will. I was simply doing my best to carry out a plan—a demigod nudging things along so that a larger and more ancient wheel could continue turning smoothly. A guardian of harmonious action. Eventually the spell was broken. I

no longer have the power I did, but the memory remains.

Sometimes

Sometimes I want it back.

My influence in the community is one voice out of many. My power is based on size and strength, and past deeds in the memory of the people. But the Citizens haven't seen what I've seen. They don't know what I know. They don't feel the keen absence of the glowing strands that once connected us—connected them to me. The strands that let me feel their pain, know their hopes and dreams, and cherish them—protect them, better than anyone else. When conflict arises, as it inevitably does, about how best to go forward in this new life we're creating, progress grinds to a halt. I sit and listen as they scream about petty concerns and I seethe, because I know their deep desire for peace—I have felt it from each one of them—and it's torture to see them stomp upon their own dreams for lack of leadership. In those moments, I hear the voice again.

It calls out softly, from somewhere deep and dark. If I close my eyes and listen, the white light I remember begins to glow behind my eyes. If I could reach it, would they listen? If I could bring that light back to this city, would we prosper?

I know I will never be an ordinary person. My metal body is a curiosity to some, a threat to others. I don't know if I am aging, if I will ever die. I can't ignore these differences, so I must embrace them. Why not choose to believe that I am this way for a reason? Why not accept my place apart from the rest, and take up the power before me?

If the power came calling, I would answer.

For the peace and prosperity of New Metropolis,

Milo

METROPOLIS

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